The Devil's Errand Boy (Short Story)

by Olson

Growing up in Manila is like volunteering for an experiment where they keep changing the rules. It's like agreeing to be a test subject for a drug that might make you see God or might make your eyeballs melt. Nobody knows which, least of all the doctors. It is a living, breathing organism that feeds on the dreams and desperation of millions of souls, and somehow I've survived twenty-one years in its long kiss.

I'm not special, just another local kid who's developed the necessary adaptations to survive this place. I work as a motorcycle courier, weaving through traffic that would make a New York cabbie soil himself. It's a job that requires equal parts suicidal confidence and preternatural reflexes. I deliver everything from legal documents to mysterious packages that tick ominously. Don't ask, don't tell is the unofficial motto of Rapid Fire Couriers, and it's kept me employed and mostly alive.

My apartment is a concrete box in the belly of the beast, six floors up with no elevator and a gorgeous view of the adjacent building's moldy wall. The shower runs brown for the first thirty seconds, and the electricity cuts out whenever it rains, which is roughly 100 days a year. But it's mine, paid for with cash I earned by risking my neck on these psychotic streets. My mother thinks I work at a call center. That lie is my gift to her - a small mercy in a merciless world.

I'd been awake for approximately 39 hours when the call came in. This wasn't unusual. I'd developed a relationship with certain pharmaceutical compounds that allowed me to push the boundaries of human endurance. My boss, a sweaty man named Rodrigo with a face like a bloated corpse, had a "special delivery" for me. In Rodrigo's lexicon, "special" meant "potentially illegal and definitely dangerous."

"This one's different, kid," he wheezed into the phone. "Client asked for you specifically. Paying triple the rate."

My brain, marinated in pills and instant coffee, registered only the phrase "triple the rate." That meant I could probably fix my bike's transmission, which had been making dying cat noises for weeks.

"Where am I going?" I asked, already reaching for my helmet.

"The Paradiso Club."

I felt a twitch in my left eye. The Paradiso was known to everyone with a functioning nervous system. A palace of sin where the elite gathered to lose money, dignity, and occasionally their lives. It was owned by Edgar Ramirez, a man whose name was whispered rather than spoken in most circles.

"Who's the client?" I asked, though I already suspected the answer.

"The big boss, Ramirez himself," Rodrigo confirmed. "He says you delivered a package to him last month. Must have liked your style…or you. Who knows with these people."

I remembered that delivery - a small wooden box sealed with wax that I'd handed directly to Ramirez's personal assistant, a woman with cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. She'd studied me for an uncomfortable moment before nodding and slipping me a tip that exceeded my weekly salary.

"I'll be there in twenty," I said, hanging up before Rodrigo could add anything more that might make me reconsider.

The streets of Manila were their usual apocalyptic tangle of vehicles, moving in a chaotic ballet that seemed to defy both physics and common sense. I navigated through them like a fish through water, my mind floating in that perfect state of chemical alertness that makes everything seem slightly unreal.

The Paradiso's exterior was designed to broadcast wealth and exclusivity. A colonial-era building retrofitted with modern security systems and staffed by men who looked like they killed people for breakfast. I parked my battered Honda next to a row of luxury cars, feeling like I'd brought a knife to a nuclear war.

At the entrance, a security guard with a face like a clenched fist stopped me with fists clenched. "Delivery for Mr. Ramirez," I said, trying to sound like this was a regular occurrence and not the most terrifying moment of my young life.

He spoke into a mic, waited for a response, then nodded. "Eleventh floor. Someone will meet you."

The elevator was mirrored on all sides, creating an infinite regression of my disheveled appearance: hair wild from the helmet, eyes red-rimmed from sleeplessness, faded Metallica t-shirt damp with sweat. By the time the doors opened, I'd counted at least fourteen visible flaws in my presentation.

The woman waiting for me was Sofia, Ramirez's assistant. She wore the same black pantsuit as before, though this time accessorized with a gold necklace that probably cost more than everything I owned combined.

"Follow me," she said, her voice clipped and professional. "Mr. Ramirez is waiting."

We walked down a hallway decorated with artwork that looked suspiciously like pieces I'd seen in museum catalogs, then through a set of double doors into an office that could have housed my entire apartment building.

Edgar Ramirez stood by the window, silhouetted against the Manila skyline. He was a short man, dressed in a suit that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. When he turned, I noticed his most distinctive feature: heterochromatic eyes, one brown, one green, that seemed to be evaluating my net worth down to the last peso.

"Ah, the courier," he said, his voice softer than I'd expected. "What was your name again?"

"Miguel," I replied, fighting the urge to add "sir" or possibly "your excellency."

"Miguel," he repeated, as if testing the sound. "You delivered a package to me last month. A small wooden box."

I nodded, unsure if speaking would improve my chances of leaving this room alive.

"Do you know what was in that box, Miguel?"

"No, sir." This time the "sir" slipped out naturally. "I never ask about what I deliver."

Ramirez smiled, revealing teeth that were unnaturally perfect. "Smart kid. But in this case, I'll tell you. It was a jade dragon figurine. Very old, very valuable." He moved to his desk and opened a drawer, removing a small green object. "This."

The figurine was about the size of my palm, carved with incredible detail. Its eyes seemed to catch the light in a way that made them look alive.

"Worth more than you'll earn in your lifetime," Ramirez continued. "Do you know what makes it special?"

I shook my head, transfixed by the little dragon.

"It's said to bring good fortune to its owner, but only if the owner is worthy." He placed it on the desk between us. "Since it came into my possession, three of my rivals have experienced unfortunate accidents. My profits have increased by twenty percent. And I've found myself thinking about you."

This last statement sent a chill down my spine. Being thought about by Edgar Ramirez seemed like a condition best avoided.

"Me?" I managed to squeeze out.

"Yes. You see, I believe in signs, Miguel. The courier who brings such good fortune might himself be fortunate." He leaned forward. "I have another delivery for you. Much more important than the last."

Sofia approached with a small metal briefcase, which she placed on the desk. Ramirez pressed his thumb against a fingerprint scanner, and the case opened with a soft click.

Inside was a manila envelope and a handgun.

"The envelope contains documents that must reach this address by midnight," Ramirez said, sliding a piece of paper toward me. "The gun is for your protection. The men who want these documents will kill to get them."

I stared at the gun. I'd never held one before, let alone fired one. In my neighborhood, guns were ubiquitous but always in someone else's hands - usually someone you were running from.

"I deliver packages, Mr. Ramirez," I said, my voice steadier than I felt. "Not... whatever this is."

Ramirez's mismatched eyes fixed on me. "I'm offering you a hundred thousand pesos, Miguel. For one delivery."

The amount hit me like a physical blow. One hundred thousand was real money. It was a boost in life, a better apartment, maybe even some left to start college. It was everything I needed handed to me in exchange for what would almost certainly be my last delivery.

"Why me?" I asked, stalling for time while my brain tried to calculate the exact odds of my survival.

"The dragon chose you," Ramirez said simply, as if this explained everything. "And I've learned to trust its judgment."

Any sane person would have walked away. But sanity is a luxury here, like clean water or honest politicians. Besides, I'd been running on pills and adrenaline for so long that the boundary between good and bad decisions had blurred to nothing.

"I'll need a better bike," I said.

Ramirez smiled. "Sofia will take you to the garage. Choose whatever you like."

The garage beneath the Paradiso contained a collection of vehicles that would make the upper crust weep with envy. I settled on a matte black Ducati that responded to the slightest touch like an eager lover.

Sofia briefed me on the details - the address was in Quezon City, the delivery was time-sensitive, and different groups might try to intercept me. She handed me a phone. "Mr. Ramirez will be tracking your progress. Do not deviate from the route we've programmed."

The sun was setting as I merged into traffic, the Ducati purring between my legs. The gun was heavy in my pocket, a constant reminder of how far I'd strayed from ordinary courier work in a single day.

I was halfway to the spot when the first attempt came. Two men on motorcycles pulled alongside me at a stoplight. I recognized the look in their eyes, the slight bulge under their jackets. I gunned the Ducati through the red light, weaving between cars and pedestrians with the desperate grace of someone who has chosen speed over safety.

They stayed with me for three blocks before I lost them in the maze of side streets I'd navigated since childhood. My heart was pounding, flooding my system with a natural high that made the pharmaceutical ones seem pale by comparison.

The second attempt was more sophisticated. A white delivery van tried to force me into a concrete barrier. I dropped the Ducati so low my knee scraped the pavement, shooting through a gap between the SUV and a fruit vendor's cart that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. The vendor's curses followed me down the street, but I was already gone, a dead man on an impossibly fast machine.

The third attempt never came. Or maybe it did, and I just didn't recognize it. Manila has a way of hiding danger in plain sight. That friendly taxi driver might be a kidnapper, that smiling food stall worker might be slipping something into your drink. By the time I reached the address, I was seeing threats in every shadow.

The building was unassuming - a mid-rise apartment complex like a thousand others in the city. I parked the Ducati and approached the security guard, who nodded as if he'd been expecting me.

"Fourteenth floor," he said. "Apartment 1407."

The elevator was out of order, so I climbed fourteen flights of stairs with my hand on the gun in my pocket. Apartment 1407 had a red door with no nameplate. I knocked, waited, knocked again.

The door opened to reveal an elderly Chinese man in a silk robe. He looked at me with milky eyes that suggested cataracts, blindness, or hardcore drugs.

"You have something for me?" he asked in accented English.

I handed him the envelope. He ran his fingers over it, nodded, then reached into his robe and produced a small jade figurine identical to the one Ramirez had shown me.

"For your employer," he said. "Tell him it’s to restore the balance."

I took the dragon, its weight surprisingly substantial for such a small object. The old man closed the door before I could ask any of the questions swirling in my mind.

Outside, the bike was where I'd left it, but the city had changed. Or perhaps I had. The streets seemed sharper, the lights brighter, the faces around me more distinct. I realized I was coming down from the amphetamines, entering that strange clarity that sometimes precedes total collapse.

Ramirez was waiting when I returned to the Paradiso, sitting behind his massive desk with a glass of amber liquid in his hand. Sofia stood beside him, her face expressionless.

"The old man gave me this," I said, placing the jade dragon on the desk. "He said to tell you the balance is restored or something."

Ramirez picked up the figurine, examining it closely. "Did he now? Interesting." He looked up at me. "And did you look in the envelope, Miguel?"

The truth was, it hadn't even occurred to me. Whatever game Ramirez was playing, I'd been too focused on staying alive to wonder about the rules.

"No," I said.

"Wise again." He pushed a briefcase across the desk. "Your payment, as promised."

I opened it to find neatly stacked bills. One hundred thousand pesos, looking remarkably ordinary for an amount that would fix my life.

"There's more work for you, if you're interested," Ramirez said. "Special deliveries, for special clients."

I really should have said no. Should have taken the money and disappeared, to a province place Ramirez had never heard of. But Manila is a city that gets in your blood, that becomes part of your cellular structure. And whatever insanity had driven me to take this job in the first place was still there, humming beneath my skin.

"What kind of work?" I heard myself asking.

Ramirez smiled, and for a moment his mismatched eyes seemed to glow with an inner light. "The kind that changes history, Miguel. The kind that makes kings and topples governments." He leaned forward. "The kind that might get you killed but will never bore you."

I took the job. Of course I did. Where I’m from, death is just another occupational hazard, like traffic or catcallers. And boredom? That's the real killer.

As I rode the Ducati back to my apartment, the sun was rising over the bay, painting the polluted sky in shades of pink and gold. I felt like I was seeing everything for the first time, not as a local,, but as a visitor to some strange and terrible rabbit hole.

8 days later, I moved into a new apartment with clean water. Paid all the deposits in cash, and the Ducati was registered in my name. I bought new clothes, a new phone, a new janky identity. My mother thinks I got promoted to team leader at the call center. Another merciful lie.

At night, I dream of jade dragons and mismatched eyes. I wake up sweating, reaching for the gun I've learned to keep under my pillow. Ramirez calls at strange hours, sending me on errands that make less and less sense but pay more and more money.

I've delivered packages to government officials, to known criminals, to a priest who blessed me in Latin(I think?) before handing me a vial of what looked suspiciously like blood. I've outrun police, gangsters, and on one memorable occasion, a man who seemed to be half-human and half-something else.

I know this can't last, but in Manila, nothing does. Not wealth, not safety, not the strange invincibility I feel when I'm riding through the city at dawn, carrying secrets worth killing for.

But not today. Today I'm still riding, still employed, still alive in a city that eats its young. I'm something more than just another kid trying to survive.

And in my world, that's as close to winning as it gets.